

# Darlene Mersereau

*Kerry J. Bickford, VOICES Editor*

Darlene Mersereau grew up in South Boston in a family where addiction was always a factor. She watched as members of her family struggled, either due to personal use or the impacts of others' illness, and does not recall ever receiving any support from "outside." Years later, when her son Christopher Chase began to struggle, she remembers that "all my energy went to fighting addiction" but without knowing where and how to find the right support. When his battle ended, on October 15, 2016, Darlene moved "from external quiet and internal chaos" to complete quiet. There was nothing left to fight, and a new occupant had taken up residence in her heart named grief.

Christopher grew up a "Mama's boy" for the first part of his life, living in a household of women, including his mother and grandmother before Darlene had two more children. He had a very close relationship with his Nana Judy throughout his life. Chris nurtured a variety of beloved "pets growing up, including turtles, frogs, a tarantula, snakes, and rats." He loved "being outdoors in nature" and using his hands to take things apart and put them back together. His mom described him as being "super funny and sarcastic." Still, he began showing some behavioral difficulties at a very young age, which turned into mental health issues and eventually led to substance abuse. When Chris was a young child, he started mental health counseling, but the programs were deficient and accessing care was challenging.

Chris's addiction spun out of control and took a toll on his family for many years. Darlene found herself fighting for him in every way she knew how -- bringing him to mental health providers, working through the courts, and getting him into treatment. In 2013, Chris was in prison for 10 months on drug-related charges. When he was released, Darlene and her family assumed he was sober now and welcomed him back into their home and lives. However, within months, it became apparent that Chris had been able to continue his drug use while in MCI-Shirley, and his addiction was as bad as it had ever been. In 2014, she could no longer allow his behavior to impact his younger siblings, and Darlene had to ask Chris to leave their home.

Their relationship was severely strained until Mother's Day 2015, when Christopher sent Darlene flowers and a precious card seeking reunification with his family. Darlene knew that he had been living in Salem with his father and another roommate, but soon learned that he was on medication for opioid-use disorder so she began meeting him for lunch and rebuilding their relationship. During this time, Chris drove a scooter up the Lynnway early each morning for his daily dose of methadone and worked several jobs, including one as a dog groomer and another as a landscaper. Darlene recalls that Christmas 2015 was one of the best, with both of Chris's grandmothers and siblings present. No one could have imagined that by the following Christmas, he would be gone. Says Darlene, "At this point, all I was thinking was that he beat addiction."

Christopher deeply valued his freedom and spent most of 2016 working, riding his motorcycle, and reconnecting with friends and loved ones. He had never looked healthier, Darlene says. But in an unlucky twist of fate, he got pulled over that summer due to a mistaken identity. He had brass knuckles in his possession, which were prohibited based upon his robbery conviction, and it was enough to throw him into a panic and fear for his freedom again. He began to wean his methadone dose down in case he landed back behind bars, and he became increasingly worried as the court date approached. Although the case was continued, Chris ended up overdosing on a cocktail of methadone, cocaine, and heroin in the wee hours of the morning on October 15, when his roommate found him in the bathroom with the shower running. The anxiety and stress were too much for Chris and he had relapsed with a tragic result.

A month after Christopher's death, Darlene attended a volunteer meeting for a street outreach program in Braintree. At that meeting, she heard Robyn Houston-Bean speak about The Sun Will Rise Foundation, which was holding monthly peer grief support meetings for people grieving the loss of a loved one to overdose. Robyn had lost her son Nick the previous year and had formed this foundation to honor his life and help other people. Darlene had never attended any kind of peer support meeting before then and did not know what to expect, so being there was initially a challenge. But by listening to the stories of others, the feeling of "me too" began to resonate. Before long, Darlene was questioning why she had not discovered peer support sooner. She also wondered why her town (Weymouth), which had one of the highest overdose rates along the South Shore at that time, didn't offer something similar. But she was grateful to find the group and began attending meetings and connecting with other bereaved parents regularly. A year later, Darlene offered to facilitate a group locally, which was initially very structured and curriculum-based. After eight weeks, Darlene changed the format to an open meeting and has been facilitating this twice a month -- ever since -- through TSWR, including by Zoom during the first eight months of the pandemic. "We reversed back to in-person meetings as soon as possible," said Darlene, feeling the need for face-to-face interaction.

"It's all awful," says Darlene about the tragic stories of those SUD has claimed. "Finding a group to share stories without judgment made me realize how wrong I was thinking I could manage it all alone. It's earth-shattering when it happens to you; you are entirely different, and everything changes. By meeting others who have had similar losses to mine, I have become more comfortable sharing my grief process and have recently signed up to attend the Peer Grief Ally training through SADOD beginning in January 2022."

Like every other peer grief helper and Ally, Darlene is a shining example of not allowing the heartbreaking loss of a loved one, her oldest son, to define her -- or him. Instead, she pulled all the pieces of her broken heart together and created a safe space where others could find grief support and remember their loved ones with respect and reverence.